977.338
B64c

Booton, Joseph F.

Centennial celebration of the Bishop Hill colony. (1946)

LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

http://archive.org/details/centennialcelebrbis00illi

Centennial Celebration

OF THE

BISHOP HILL COLONY

BISHOP HILL, ILL.

Monday, September 23, 1946

STATE OF ILLINOIS

DWIGHT H. GREEN
Governor

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS AND BUILDINGS

WALTER A. ROSENFIELD
Director

IVAN A. PALMER
Asst. Director

"In assuming control of the Bishop Hill property, the State of Illinois has acquired a most significant historical possession — and the obligation to preserve it. May it long endure not only as a definite monument to the little band of courageous men and women who settled here a century ago, but in a broader sense as a visual symbol of those countless other Americans of Swedish descent who through the years have contributed so notably to the cultural, industrial and commercial achievements which have made our Nation great."

Dwight H. Green

THE STORY OF BISHOP HILL

BY

JOSEPH F. BOOTON AND GEORGE M. NEDVED

TODAY, September 23, 1946, the State of Illinois joins with the descendants of the original colonists in observing the centennial anniversary of this village. Its founding one hundred years ago was not only important in the history of our own state, but was a vital force in the life and development of the entire Middle West where, according to the 1940 census, there are 726,689 persons of Swedish descent. Bishop Hill was the forerunner of this Swedish-American population of today. The early story is well known and will not be repeated at length here—instead we will describe the Old Colony Church, its early history and surroundings, how it came to be built, its subsequent history and future. This structure, together with the public square, was deeded by the townspeople to the State of Illinois and accepted by Governor Dwight H. Green, June 20, 1946.

Like the Pilgrim fathers of New England before them, the founders of Bishop Hill had forsaken the religious oppression of their native land, and had sought in the United States new homes and new opportunities. Their leader, Eric Janson, following harsh persecution, dispatched Olof Olson, one of the flock, to America to select a likely location for a proposed settlement. Olson's final selection was this spot here in Illinois. After pooling their resources to form a community fund, the first of several groups set sail from the city of Gefle, Sweden,

in early 1846, and arrived in New York in June. By boat, wagon, and on foot they made their way in an arduous journey through the American wilderness to Chicago, and finally arrived in Henry County in July, 1846.

By September they had acquired 696 acres for which they paid $1,950, and were "established" after a fashion in two log houses and four large tents. In October the second party arrived, and it was necessary to construct "dugouts"—space carved out of the ravine bluffs. The largest structure was the tent church, a combination of wood and canvas. In addition to providing space during winter months for 800 worshipers, it served as a school, food storehouse, and provided shelter for many families, so when it burned in the spring of 1848 the "colonists" were faced with another grave problem.

More parties arrived and now there were 800 mouths to feed. All had pooled their belongings and worked for the common aim—to live and worship in their own way under the guidance of their leader, Eric Janson. They made brick, burned cement and lime, felled timber and sawed it into lumber. They had acquired timberland and a sawmill. Before they could establish communal farming and industries on a profitable basis they must build themselves homes—and now a new church, in a hurry, for winter was approaching.

We can imagine the hustle and bustle following this decision. The leaders so organized the work that everyone not engaged in keeping the community alive was assigned to work on the new church. The ox-boys

made regular trips to nearby cities—to Peru for walnut siding, and to Chicago for lumber. Nails, glass, paint, sheet metal came from Rock Island.

Speed was essential so the crack of the hammer, the thud of the axe, and the rasp of the saw were heard from early morning until sundown. Everyone was busy as a beaver, some laying brick, some adzing oak and walnut timbers, others making sash and doors. In due time the building assumed shape. They continued to work all winter and by spring 1849 the last coats of paint were applied and the building was ready for occupancy.

The white clapboarded structure had three stories, one floor of ten apartments below grade, another floor of same size and use at grade, and above them at the second floor level was the auditorium, two multi-purpose rooms (school and meetings), entrance lobby and gallery above. The auditorium was reached by a double outside stair at the north. The exterior walls and interior partition were plastered over sun dried brick laid between the wood studs. Floors generally were of wood, but the basement apartments were tamped clay. The pews of gracious design were of solid walnut. The building was lighted by candles and lamps. The church was unheated but the apartments below had fireplaces. For its time, it was a great undertaking and for a number of years it was the major building in the village and county. In the century following, only minor changes have been made and today it is essentially the same as constructed by these hardy pioneers.

We have, thus far, assembled a partial list of those who occupied the "apartments". Mrs. O. Pitstrand moved here, and Mrs. Kate Nelson shared one room with four others families—Lars, Lunds, Loders, and a "Jonas and Lena", comprising eleven persons. Others who lived here were Mr. Chaiser, the colony printer, Willie and Agnes Berg, and Mrs. Swan Olson. Mr. Gilliam, the coffin maker, lived and worked in the building. One of the basement rooms was used for cheese making. The northwest room, second floor, was a class room and across the lobby in the northeast corner, Hellsen, the tailor, lived and worked. Later, Grausfar and A. Berglund lived in the same room, and finally it was used by the school as second class room. On May 13, 1850, a great calamity befell the colony—Eric Janson died. A new era of leadership was inaugurated when Jonas Olson was selected to carry on in Janson's place.

In 1853, Bishop Hill was incorporated and Jonas Olson, with six trustees, were appointed to act for the community. Finally in 1862, after two years of negotiation, the property was divided and Bishop Hill became another Illinois village as far as its government was concerned.

What became of our Colony Church? The faithful continued to climb the steps and worship under its roof. In 1864 a Methodist group was organized in the upper northeast room. Olson preached until about 1890 and Ostberg continued the work, and later was followed by Ericson, who served until 1909, and Strum followed until 1911, after which time there were no regular preachers.

Following 1921, the auditorium has stood idle and was seldom disturbed except for an occasional visitor. Some of the lower rooms were used up to 1940. Thus ended nearly a century of service.

Now this edifice is another of the many historical shrines under State guardianship—now it belongs to all the people. In behalf of the descendants of the "Colonists" and the State of Illinois, we wish to thank the many public-spirited persons in all parts of the State who gave so much of their time that this structure might be added to the State Park System. The Division of Parks and Memorials and the Division of Architecture and Engineering pledge all the resources at their command to the end that this church will be returned to its original appearance, and that the State will everlastingly protect and preserve the appropriate relics which have been donated for exhibition within its walls. When completed it will be, in effect, a living museum of this early Illinois community of Swedish settlers, complete in all details including furnishings, just as though we were back in the fifties "looking in" at a moment when everyone had stepped out.

We also wish to thank those who, thus far, have so generously donated their cherished possessions and those who, in the future, will turn over to the State authentic relics for the enjoyment and education of the future generations who will journey here. All donor's names will be duly recorded on a public record, so that all may know of their good will, generosity, and their desire to perpetuate the memory of the indomitable founders of this century-old community.

THE DIVISION OF PARKS AND MEMORIALS
GEORGE W. WILLIAMS,
Superintendent.

THE DIVISION OF ARCHITECTURE AND ENGINEERING
C. HERRICK HAMMOND,
Supervising Architect.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
977.338864C C001
CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF THE BISHOP HIL
3 0112 025390193